

Congressional Brief: Public Lands

The federal government owns some of the nation's most magnificent landscapes and treasured resources, but it also owns some lands with no particularly striking characteristics or special environmental value. Unfortunately, it has managed the public's natural resources as poorly as it has managed the federal budget. Unable to balance land use and preservation, government management of public lands has shifted between periods of exploitation or overuse and periods of "protection" or "preservation" bordering on neglect. The result has been degradation of the public lands and the wildlife that depends on them.

Key Facts about Public Lands

The federal government owns and controls more than 650 million acres, totaling more than 29 percent of the land in the United States. However, stewardship of these lands is fragmented:

- More than 83.6 million acres is managed by the National Park Service, consisting of 390 parks, historic sites, scenic rivers and recreation areas.
- More than 193 million acres is managed by the Forest Service, consisting of a system of 155 national forests, 20 national grasslands, 20 research and experimental forests, and other areas.
- More than 258 million acres is controlled by the Bureau of Land Management.
- More than 96 million acres is set aside in national wildlife refuges supervised by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Problems Managing Public Lands

Public lands are a commons, facing the same problem many other valuable common-pool resources face: overuse. Public commons are controlled through the political process, leading to disparate, sometimes contradictory and shifting goals for their management, and with internal incentive structures often at odds with external goals. As a result, public land managers are often rewarded for making what others perceive as perverse decisions.

Problems in National Parks. Problems with the National Parks became apparent almost immediately after the Park Service was created in 1916, as the goals of

"preservation" and providing for the "enjoyment of the people" arguably conflicted.

- The Park Service was successful in both attracting visitors (287 million people in 1999) and increasing the number of grazing animals — but success came at a high price.
- High visitor numbers, low fees and limited congressional appropriations have led to a record multibillion-dollar backlog in repairs and maintenance.
- The absence of predators to keep their populations in check and periodic fires to stimulate plant growth has led to an overpopulation of grazing animals.

Problems in National Forests. The 155 national forests have more than 800 million visits by recreational users per year (some visitors make multiple visits) to camp, motorbike, ride horses, hunt and hike.

- Over the past two decades, logging in national forests was greatly reduced. Timber harvests have plunged 75 percent from 12 billion board feet per year in the 1980s to less than 4 billion board feet per year.
- Many national forests have more standing dead timber or parasite-infested trees in decline than newer, growing trees.
- Other forests have stands of trees that are too thick (too many trees growing in too small an area) due to successful fire suppression programs, logging that has not kept pace with forest growth, and forest replanting programs that stress the monoculture of fast-growing, commercially valuable species. As a

result, many national forests have lost biodiversity and/or the trees are not reaching their growth potential.

- Overcrowding contributes to the continuing decline in forests' health. It also increases the likelihood and severity of fires:
 - According to Forest Service figures, fully 60 percent of national forest land is unhealthy and faces abnormal fire hazards.

- And of the more than 90 million acres at high risk for catastrophic fires, 14 million acres are located in designated roadless areas.
- Four of the nation's 10 largest wildfires over the last decade, each scorching more than 250,000 acres, occurred in 2007.
- From June 20 to July 25, 2008, fires burned 1,078,616 acres, with the number of simultaneous fires peaking at 2,095.

NCPA Policy Recommendations

There is no compelling reason to keep properties that are not environmentally unique or significant in the public domain, rather than sell them to private parties (individuals, companies or nonprofit organizations). The private sector currently preserves, protects and promotes many historically important properties and manages the majority of the country's forests and rangelands. Moreover, it manages them in ways that promote environmental quality and benefit the owners and the public at large.

Sell public lands. Surely as an experiment the United States can safely and perhaps profitably sell some of the hundreds of millions of acres of federal land. For example, portions of national forests could be sold for market value. If there is one private owner of land abutting the property, it could first be offered to that owner for continuity of management. If that landowner is not interested or the forest abuts state lands or multiple private properties, it could be auctioned to the highest bidder.

- Forest product companies, sportsmen's clubs and environmental groups would likely buy certain forested lands. Undoubtedly the range of interests bidding on the forests would be limited only by location, access and the imagination of the bidders. Some of these lands will likely be developed.
- While they will no longer be public forests, many and perhaps most will be managed in ways that protect their natural character. For instance, forest companies have an incentive to manage their forests in sustainable ways, which enhances both their environmental and economic value.
- Unlike the federal government, private companies do not have the general treasury to bail out money-losing operations and therefore do not build uneconomical roads in ecologically fragile areas to cut down uneconomical trees.

Allow alternative management. There are various mechanisms or institutional arrangements that would still bring many of the benefits of ownership without removing land entirely from public control.

- For instance, it is unlikely the public would allow the federal government to sell crown-jewel national parks like Yellowstone or wilderness areas like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In such cases, Congress could establish Wilderness Endowment Boards to own and manage them, as suggested by economists Richard Stroup and John Baden. These government-chartered, nonprofit entities, whose board members would be approved by Congress, would have a narrowly-defined fiduciary duty to protect and enhance the natural values of the land under their charge.
- Public lands retained by the federal government could still receive some of the environmental benefits of ownership if there were competition within the public system between federal, state and local governments.
- State and local foresters manage millions of acres. In contrast to federal forests, state forests often make money. They are also healthier environmentally. Congress could allow any state or county that demonstrates superior economic *and* environmental performance to take over the management of the national forests within their state or area.
- Congress could give fixed but declining block grants during a transition period to the forestry agencies that apply and allow them to retain any revenues generated. The program should be allowed to run for several years so state and county foresters could counteract the effects of federal mismanagement. At the end of the trial, states and counties that have improved a forest's economic and environmental performance could be granted the forests outright and federal payments ended. If forests have not improved, they could be returned to federal control and new management experiments implemented.